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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: Ambassador's Introductory Call on Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs

REF A) Monrovia 26 B) 07 Monrovia 612

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a courtesy call by the Ambassador, Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs (MPEA) Amarah Konneh, who has been in office five months (ref B), thanked the USG for the "quick win" of the MCC threshold program and described his plans to take on the challenges of a historically moribund ministry. He is introducing development officers for each county to better coordinate the GOL's poverty reduction strategies and is working to bring progress to the rule of law sector of the government. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Konneh has focused the MPEA on monitoring the effectiveness of the GOL's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). Disdaining vague evaluations, such as "off track," for PRS deliverables, he is developing measurable indicators on whether poverty is being reduced nationwide. In addition to his PRS monitoring role, Konneh is the GOL lead in shepherding Liberia's Millennium Challenge Corporation Threshold Program, a role he embraces with gusto. Konneh said he appreciated the Ambassador's confidence in his abilities, and had taken her support as a challenge to rebuild the Ministry of Planning. Noting it had been years since MPEA had chalked up a success of any kind, he said announcement of the MCC Threshold program had invigorated his staff, and they were committed to working closely with the USG and other partners on the Poverty Reduction Strategy. (Note: The GOL plans to incorporate MPEA into the Ministry of Finance, with Konneh's cooperation, but it will be some time before the legislative climate permits the consolidation. End note.)

¶3. (SBU) Konneh and the Ambassador discussed issues related to development: how to increase GOL "ownership" of policies, how to manage expectations, and how to rebuild the technical capabilities of a woefully under-educated and poorly-compensated civil service. The Ambassador noted that it is much easier for the USG to support ministries with good strategic plans, and encouraged Konneh's plans to improve that capacity among his colleagues.

Closer Monitoring of County Development

¶4. (SBU) Konneh has brought visible energy to MPEA. There are new renovations underway throughout the building, including a computer lab where MPEA staff are being trained to do the monitoring and evaluation he envisions. MPEA is one of the few ministries that has grown, increasing to 154 employees, up from 135. Konneh has added County Development Officers, just now being trained and about to be deployed around the country. He described their role as serving as secretariats for the troubled County Development Committees (CDCs), and they are tasked to coordinate closely with each county's Superintendent and legislative caucus. That relationship has been fraught, as executive and legislative branch officials wrangle for their share of the tempting pot of county development funds.

¶5. (SBU) The MPEA officers are to provide first-hand monitoring of development projects in each county, reporting problems and progress to the CDCs and through MPEA to guide decisions by the Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee that oversees PRS implementation. The MPEA officers, Konneh said, are better-paid

than their county counterparts, but have been instructed to build coalitions, develop rapport with county officials, and not to act as if they are part of an elite. A January 22 dinner hosted by the Minister of Internal Affairs, who oversees the county superintendents, was intended to introduce the superintendents to the new MPEA development officers and hopefully engender a collegial spirit of cooperation.

Rule of Law Pillar Improving

¶6. (SBU) In the context of improving PRS implementation, Konneh has assumed leadership of the fractiously uncooperative and ineffective Rule of Law pillar (ref A), and is even showing progress in that politically volatile minefield. (Note: His most significant achievement has been encouraging GOL agencies that had ignored the Pillar entirely, such as the Governance Commission, the Civil Service Agency, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, to regularly present progress on their deliverables at Pillar meetings. End note.)

Guinea is of concern

¶7. (SBU) In response to Konneh's question, the Ambassador said the USG is watching Guinea very closely, that we support the ECOWAS position, and that Africans and their governments have to make it very clear that the time for coups is over.

Coming to terms with the past

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¶8. (SBU) Konneh, a Mandingo and a Muslim, described his recent trip back to his village in Gbarpolu County, his first since leaving, at the age of 18, on January 18, 1990. He had visited the bridge where his father was killed, and been able to talk to some of the eyewitnesses. (Comment: We had heard reports that Konneh witnessed the murder of his father and brothers, but from his account it sounded as if he had not been present. End comment.) He said the rebel "generals" who instigated the violence, long-time friends and neighbors, have returned to farming, are wracked by remorse, and have been forgiven by the villagers.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD